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Public Health Moves from Response to Recovery Following Chemical Leak
State Health Officer sends 865 letters to health care providers seeking voluntary reporting of symptomatic patients with exposure to the contaminated water following chemical spill

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – Just over two months have passed since the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Bureau for Public Health began its response to the January 9, 2014 Elk River chemical spill that left nearly 300,000 residents without drinking water. The Bureau for Public Health's focus has now shifted from response to recovery.

"Our goal from day one has been to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the public in our communities," said Dr. Letitia Tierney, State Health Officer and Commissioner for the Bureau for Public Health. "We are moving forward with the recovery effort beginning to focus on community assessments."

Tierney has sent letters to 865 physicians across the 9-county region who may have treated patients affected by the chemical spill. The correspondence requests the provider voluntarily report in aggregate, all symptomatic patients with exposure to water contaminated by MCHM through ingestion, skin contact or inhalation.

"Emergency department surveillance and working with the West Virginia Poison Center helped us determine immediate critical health concerns," Tierney said. "Now that we have moved into the recovery phase, we're reaching out to healthcare providers to obtain data on any patient that may have been exposed to the contaminated water. Any and all data that these healthcare providers believe that could be connected to the chemical spill, we welcome."

Additionally, Tierney said the Bureau for Public Health is awaiting the results of the CDC's chart review of patients who visited the emergency department with concerns from January 9-23, 2014. This information along with the Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER), which will be conducted in April, are all part of the recovery phase.

"It's important to remember that this incident has been unprecedented for West Virginia and the country," Tierney added. "We have been moving forward in a careful, thoughtful and deliberative manner working closely with the CDC, health departments and medical providers."

To learn more about the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, go to www.dhhr.wv.gov/bph.

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